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# The sharing economy ideal

## Implementing an organization-sponsored sharing platform as a CSR program

The sharing  
economy ideal

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – Bridging noted gaps in the sharing economy and corporate social responsibility (CSR) literatures, the purpose of this paper is to investigate how an organization-sponsored sharing platform – a new class of information technology (IT) and the sharing economy ideal – is given meaning as a CSR program for internal stakeholders.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The research involves phone interviews conducted with site coordinators of the Zimride by Enterprise® ridesharing platform in 25 organizations.

**Findings** – This case study reveals that two component processes of organizational sensemaking – sensegiving and sensebreaking – are underlying micromechanisms used by organizations to enact a sponsored sharing platform as a CSR program. Qualitative analyses demonstrate that every meaning given to Zimride remained open to sensebreaking during its implementation. As such, site coordinators were continuously drawn into sensemaking about Zimride's cognitive, linguistic and conative dimensions as a CSR program and had to exert ongoing effort to stabilize its socially (re)constructed meaning within their organization. Furthermore, site coordinators' sensegiving narrative about Zimride was often undermined by their sensebreaking communications and organizational actions, albeit unintentionally.

**Research limitations/implications** – Sponsoring a sharing platform to facilitate collaborative consumption can deliver triple bottom line benefits for both organizations and their members, but it may not. The key to accruing this potential shared value lies in how site coordinators navigate organizational sensemaking about these IT-enabled CSR programs.

**Originality/value** – This paper provides valuable insights into these sensemaking processes and develops a prescriptive framework for enacting an organization-sponsored sharing platform as a CSR program.

**Keywords** Sensemaking, Sharing economy, Micro CSR, Ridesharing platforms

**Paper type** Case study

### Introduction

Organization-sponsored sharing platforms are a new class of information technology (IT) that enable firms to create shared value with internal stakeholders by engaging them to live more sustainably as a community of prosumers[1] (Bhappu and Schultze, 2018). These platforms facilitate collaborative consumption – the peer-to-peer sharing of goods and services (Botsman, 2010) – among members of an organization by connecting them virtually in a private social network. By promoting this type of sustainable consumption, which is an important global mandate (World Economic Forum, 2013), organization-sponsored sharing platforms can help firms demonstrate and extend their corporate social responsibility (CSR) to benefit internal stakeholders.

Mounting evidence of the positive impacts of CSR programs on firm performance combined with external stakeholder pressure has created an organizational climate in which CSR initiatives can now be identified at nearly all major corporations around the world (Aguinis and Glavas, 2013). CSR is defined as “context-specific organizational actions and policies that take into account stakeholders' expectations and the triple bottom line of economic, social, and environmental performance” (Aguinis, 2011, p. 855). Furthermore, CSR includes “actions on the part of the firm that appear to advance, or acquiesce in promotion of some social good, beyond the immediate interests of the firm and its shareholders and beyond that which is required by law” (Waldman *et al.*, 2006, p. 1703).



CSR initiatives that are aligned with organizational members' consumer aspirations are more effective at engaging them (Mirvis, 2012). Firms can also motivate their employees to be critical actors and advocates for more sustainable lifestyles by leveraging the power of collaboration and community (World Economic Forum, 2013). For these reasons, organization-sponsored sharing platforms are an attractive IT-enabled CSR program. They give employees access to consumer goods and services at a lower cost, both economically and environmentally, and help them to build communal ties (Bhappu and Schultze, 2018). Furthermore, consumers are willing to pay a premium for products and services from organizations that promote the triple bottom line and facilitate the development of sustainable economies and societies (Elkington and Zeitz, 2014; Glavas, 2016a; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001). Therefore, organizations that sponsor a sharing platform can not only demonstrate their social responsibility, but also create shared value (Porter and Kramer, 2011) with internal stakeholders.

The success of CSR programs in general, and organization-sponsored sharing platforms in particular, is contingent on the active participation and support of internal stakeholders (Bhappu and Schultze, 2018; Shen and Benson, 2014). Although a recent study in the information systems literature (Bhappu and Schultze, 2018) investigates how to build engagement on these platforms, there is no research about them in the sharing economy literature. This is surprising because these IT-enabled CSR programs represent the sharing economy "ideal" (Acquier *et al.*, 2017) in that they combine its three foundational cores of access economy, community economy and platform economy. Nevertheless, their existence remains unrecognized in the sharing economy literature, which still questions "whether an ideal type that combines all three cores to leverage the different promises and mitigate most tensions will be feasible in the near future" (Acquier *et al.*, 2017, p. 9). Therefore, empirical research about these platforms would extend the sharing economy literature.

Studies of organization-sponsored sharing platforms are also absent from the CSR literature, which consists mostly of research at the organizational and institutional levels of analysis (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012). "Although CSR takes place at the organizational level of analysis, individual actors are those who actually strategize, make decisions, and execute CSR initiatives. Also, individual actors perceive such initiatives and take action as a result (e.g. purchase products, invest in firms)" (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012, p. 953). The majority of empirical studies about the impact of CSR programs on internal stakeholders simply measure and model the relationships between organizational CSR practices and individual outcomes such as employee engagement, job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior and commitment (Glavas, 2016a, b; Shen and Benson, 2014). Still missing is qualitative research that describes how CSR programs are enacted in organizations and sheds light on the underlying micromechanisms that translate CSR goals and objectives into practice (Aguinis, 2011; Aguinis and Glavas, 2012; Glavas, 2016a). Therefore, studying how organization-sponsored sharing platforms are implemented would also extend the CSR literature.

Bridging the noted gaps in the sharing economy and CSR literatures, this paper investigates how an organization-sponsored sharing platform – Zimride by Enterprise® – is given meaning as an IT-enabled CSR program. Specifically, the research question is:

*RQ1.* How do organizations enact a sponsored sharing platform as a CSR program for internal stakeholders?

The reported qualitative research involves a case study of 25 organizations that sponsored the Zimride ridesharing platform for use by their internal stakeholders. Drawing on phone interviews conducted with Zimride site coordinators at each of these organizations, the investigators use a sensemaking lens (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Weick *et al.*, 2005) to analyze how these organizations implement the Zimride ridesharing platform as a CSR program for their members.

This paper begins by first reviewing the literature on sharing platforms and then discussing organizational sensemaking. Next, it outlines the methods used to study the Zimride ridesharing platform and summarizes the qualitative findings of this research. It then discusses the implications of these results and develops a prescriptive framework for effectively enacting an organization-sponsored sharing platform as a CSR program for internal stakeholders. It concludes by discussing the limitations of the research and summarizing its contributions.

### Sharing platforms

Most platforms in the sharing economy claim to enhance the triple bottom line by promising economic, environmental and social benefits (Frenken and Schor, 2017; Sundararajan, 2016). Claimed economic benefits include cheaper access to goods and services, which are usually crowdsourced by consumers from a peer-to-peer network of strangers. Such access-based consumption is claimed to reduce the demand for material goods and provide environmental benefits, for example, when consumers borrow or reuse an item rather than buying a new one. Furthermore, such access-based consumption is claimed to facilitate collaboration and trust between strangers, thereby increasing social bonding and solidarity among prosumers when compared to retail purchase transactions.

The sharing economy, however, is replete with contradictions and tensions (Acquier *et al.*, 2017; Laurell and Sandström, 2017). Peer-to-peer sharing platforms that provide access to second-hand goods have been shown to stimulate indulgent rather than sustainable consumption, among both environmentally conscious and materialistic consumers (Parguel *et al.*, 2017). Research has also documented that peer providers of carsharing services are primarily motivated by economic rather than environmental benefits, and perceive sustainability as “an indirect consequence of participation” on a carsharing platform (Wilhelms *et al.*, 2017). There is even evidence that customers of business-to-consumer carsharing services “are disengaged from carrying out their responsibility to the car and to the others using the Zipcar services. There is no thought toward how ‘beating the hell out of’ the car will affect the next person to use the car” (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012, p. 891). Therefore, sharing platforms may not enhance the triple bottom line even if they claim to do so.

Organization-sponsored sharing platforms, however, represent the sharing economy “ideal” because they combine its three foundational cores of access economy, community economy and platform economy (Acquier *et al.*, 2017). Access refers to the sharing economy’s potential to make goods and services available to more people, expanding the diversity of prosumers in the economy. Community refers to the sharing economy’s potential to socially connect these diverse prosumers and build trust among them. Finally, platform refers to the sharing economy’s potential to promote this inclusive commerce at scale by using IT to reduce the cost of peer-to-peer relational coordination. However, “although a triple-core configuration appears ideal, it faces strong tensions in practice [...]. any attempt to achieve them all at once lays bare the paradoxical nature of the sharing economy” (Acquier *et al.*, 2017, p. 8). Therefore, the enactment of an organization-sponsored sharing platform as an IT-enabled CSR program for internal stakeholders is likely be characterized by ambiguity and contradictions.

### Organizational sensemaking

Sensemaking provides an analytical framework for understanding how, when and what tensions manifest during the implementation of an organization-sponsored sharing platform. Sensemaking emphasizes discursive action and seeks to answer questions about how organizational reality is constructed:

Organizational sensemaking is first and foremost about the question: How does something come to be an event for organizational members? Second, sensemaking is about the question: What does an event

mean? In the context of everyday life, when people confront something unintelligible and ask “what’s the story here?” their question has the force of bringing an event into existence. When people then ask “now what should I do?” this added question has the force of bringing meaning into existence, meaning that they hope is stable enough for them to act into the future, continue to act, and to have the sense that they remain in touch with the continuing flow of experience. (Weick *et al.*, 2005, p. 410)

Importantly, a sensemaking lens recognizes that discursive action is “a micro-mechanism that produces macro-change over time” (Weick *et al.*, 2005, p. 419). Sensemaking is, therefore, often used to explain how individual actors enact organizational goals and objectives (Brown *et al.*, 2015).

Sensemaking is defined as a dynamic organizational process “that involves attending to and bracketing cues in the environment, creating intersubjective meaning through cycles of interpretation and action, and thereby enacting a more ordered environment from which further cues can be drawn” (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014, p. 67). It is inherently social because organizational members “produce, negotiate, and sustain a shared sense of meaning” (Gephart *et al.*, 2010, p. 285) that propels them to take coordinated action. Sensemaking is not a process that generates truth or an accurate representation of reality (Weick, 1995). It is a process that produces plausible interpretations that align organizational stakeholders to take action:

It is about continued redrafting of an emerging story so that it becomes more comprehensive, incorporates more of the observed data, and is more resilient in the face of criticism. As the search for meanings continues, people may describe their activities as the pursuit of accuracy to get it right. However, that description is important mostly because it sustains motivation. (Weick *et al.*, 2005, p. 415)

In this way, sensemaking reflects an ongoing circular process rather than a linear one. Instead of having a clear beginning and end, and generating a stable set of meanings, every sensemaking episode carries with it residual ambiguity, that is likely to spark a new round of sensemaking.

The sensemaking process is described as having many triggers and component constructs (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). When ambiguous and uncertain events, issues or situations disrupt organizational routines and workflows, sensemaking is triggered. Whether planned or unanticipated, these triggers highlight discrepancies between expectations and reality, which propels the organization to consider changes in organizational practices and structures. The sensemaking process can also be triggered by sensebreaking, one of its component constructs. Sensebreaking is defined as “the destruction or breaking down of meaning” (Pratt, 2000, p. 464), motivates organizational members to question their previous sensemaking and to reconsider their current actions. In this way, sensebreaking can kick off a new cycle of sensemaking.

Sensegiving – another component construct of the sensemaking process – usually follows sensebreaking because organizational members seek to create new meaning to resolve the ambiguity and uncertainty in the aftermath of sensebreaking (Pratt, 2000). Sensegiving is “the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality” (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442). Sensegiving imbues proposed actions with contextual meaning through their enactment or abandonment:

Sensegiving is often studied in the context of how organizational leaders or managers strategically shape the sensemaking of organizational members through the use of symbols, images, and other influence techniques (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007). Sensegiving is not simply a top-down process, however, as those receiving sensegiving have their own interpretations and can actively resist efforts from leaders to influence strategic change (Sonenshein, 2010). Furthermore, actors at any level of an organization, or outside its boundaries, may engage in sensegiving with others (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007). (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014, pp. 67-69)

Sensegiving and sensebreaking can be uncovered through analysis of the cognitive, linguistic and conative dimensions of CSR programs that derive their meaning from organizational sensemaking (Basu and Palazzo, 2008). Cognitive dimensions of CSR programs encompass an organization's relationship with internal stakeholders and its rationale for implementing the initiative – what it thinks. Linguistic dimensions of CSR programs describe how an organization justifies its implementation of the initiative to internal stakeholders – what it says. Conative dimensions of CSR programs, however, highlight an organization's behavioral posture and consistency when implementing the initiative – what it does. In this research, sensegiving and sensebreaking are hypothesized as the underlying micromechanisms used by organizations to enact a sponsored sharing platform, namely the Zimride ridesharing platform, as a CSR program for internal stakeholders.

## Method

Ridesharing is one of the most ubiquitous forms of collaborative consumption (Sundararajan, 2016). Historically, ridesharing grew out of governmental efforts to reduce citizen consumption of natural resources but today organizations are increasingly sponsoring ridesharing platforms for internal stakeholders to comply with environmental regulations as employers (Chan and Shaheen, 2012). Zimride, therefore, provides an exemplar of an organization-sponsored sharing platform, that is being implemented as an IT-enabled CSR program.

### *The Zimride platform*

An important difference between Zimride and its better-known counterparts in the sharing economy (e.g. Bla Bla Car and Lyft) is that it facilitates ridesharing among members of an organization by connecting them virtually in a private sharing community. A sponsoring organization initially pays Zimride a one-time fee to set up its private ridesharing community, which is integrated with its IT infrastructure (e.g. single sign-on authentication system) in order to give only its organizational members access to this community. Thereafter, the organization pays a monthly subscription fee for these internal stakeholders to connect and share rides via its sponsored ridesharing community on the Zimride platform. Organizational members do not incur any transaction fees, nor do they earn any income[2], during shared rides brokered by Zimride because their collaborative consumption is subsidized by their organization.

Within each private ridesharing community on the Zimride platform, organizational members have to create a user name (first name plus first initial of last name) and user profile. They can then post offers and requests for shared rides. They can also search for rides on a number of criteria (e.g. starting location, destination, date and time). Posted rides range from daily commutes to one-off, long-distance trips. Other platform features include the automatic matching of posted rides, calculation of a suggested nominal fee for riders to pay drivers to cover the costs of a given ride, ability to make these payments online and communication options for organizational members to work out details of a shared ride (e.g. pickup location and time).

Since most riders give drivers cash to help cover the cost of a shared ride, and neither is required to update the Zimride platform after completing shared rides, the platform's ability to record actual ridesharing activity is limited. As a result, Zimride estimates the total shared miles and carbon emissions saved through ridesharing on its platform based on the default assumption that 20 percent of posted rides are actually completed. Site coordinators in sponsoring organizations can access data (via an online client dashboard) and run reports about their members' platform usage and saved carbon emissions.

*Data collection*

During Q3 2015, the investigators obtained a list of Zimride customer organizations (114) from its website (<https://zimride.com>). By cross-referencing this list with customer organizations' publicly available website information about their Zimride ridesharing community, the investigators compiled a database of contact information for site coordinators at these organizations (108). After verifying the e-mail addresses for site coordinators at each organization, the investigators sent them an invitation to participate in an hour-long interview about their Zimride ridesharing community. The invitation directed interested site coordinators to click through a provided hyperlink, which directed them to an online study disclosure and screening questionnaire.

The investigators contacted all consenting and screened participants to schedule a phone interview at a mutually convenient date and time. They used a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix), which was phenomenologically derived, to direct their questions during the scheduled phone interviews. Each interviewed Zimride site coordinator was thanked for their participation and asked for a mailing address so that the investigators could send them a \$10 gift card (optional), which were mailed out within 2–3 weeks.

In total, the investigators interviewed site coordinators of Zimride ridesharing communities at 25 sponsoring organizations (~24 percent response rate). Their sample comprised of 22 universities, 2 government organizations and 1 corporation. These organizations represented an experienced set of customers that had collectively logged an estimated 86,617,092 ridesharing miles on the Zimride platform at the commencement of the study. The majority of interviewed site coordinators were located in a university's transportation or parking department. Others were housed in IT departments, offices of student affairs and offices of sustainability. In one instance, the Zimride site coordinator was a student employed by the student senate. All interviews were transcribed from audio recordings.

The investigators used a grounded approach to analyzing their interview data. Grounded theory advocates a principle of constant comparison, theoretical sampling and a balance of deductive and inductive analysis of data (Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Glaser, 1978; Goulding, 2002). Using a sensemaking lens, the investigators independently read and reread the transcripts in order to get a holistic sense of the data overall, and to let themes emerge (Thompson, 1997). In numerous conversations, the investigators discussed the themes that each identified in an effort to converge on the significance of data that they deemed relevant to the research question, namely, how organization-sponsored ridesharing platforms are socially constructed as CSR programs. In their discussions, the investigators relied heavily on comparing and contrasting the sampled organizations on multiple dimensions including satisfaction with the ridesharing service, transportation constraints and options, site coordinator and organizational characteristics, governance roles and funding sources.

**Qualitative findings**

Interviews with Zimride site coordinators provided a number of important insights about how an organization-sponsored sharing platform is enacted as a CSR program for internal stakeholders, particularly the underlying micromechanisms. The investigators categorized this qualitative data into examples of sensegiving and sensebreaking about the cognitive, linguistic and conative dimensions (Basu and Palazzo, 2008) of the Zimride ridesharing platform. These qualitative findings are summarized in Table I and now described in more detail.

*Adopting Zimride*

All site coordinators in the study reported that the adoption of Zimride was triggered by either an organizational need to replace an outdated transportation service (e.g. a physical

**Table I.**  
Organizational  
sensemaking  
about Zimride  
as a CSR program

Cognitive dimensions – what they think about it	Linguistic dimensions – what they say about it	Conative dimensions – what they do about it
<p><i>Sensegiving</i></p> <p>They perceive Zimride as a technological innovation or an alternative transportation service</p>	<p>They promote Zimride as a safe, low-cost and sustainable solution that builds community and saves money</p>	<p>They use sustainability and environmental compliance funds to pay for Zimride</p> <p>They continue to subscribe to Zimride even when it lacks a critical mass of organizational users</p> <p>They continue to subscribe to Zimride even when it is used for infrequent long-distance rides rather than frequent commuter rides</p>
<p><i>Sensebreaking</i></p> <p>They acknowledge that their current transportation solutions are inferior to Zimride</p> <p>They realize that Zimride is highly dependent on organizational members' engagement and sociability to build a critical mass of users</p> <p>They realize that Zimride calculates carbon footprint data from estimated rather than actual ridesharing</p>	<p>They caution on having a false sense of security when using Zimride</p> <p>They make disclaimers about their liability related to Zimride</p> <p>They report that Zimride reduces their carbon footprint</p>	<p>They remain ambiguous about liability for property damage and personal injury related to Zimride</p> <p>They do not sufficiently promote or staff Zimride to build a critical mass of organizational users</p>

board or an online listserv for ridesharing) or an organizational need to identify a new solution to an existing transportation problem (e.g. limited campus parking or access to nearby towns).

In the first instance when organizations were upgrading a current ridesharing solution, the effectiveness of their existing service – its established organizational meaning – was cast in doubt. This sensebreaking raised questions within the organization about suitable replacements that offered improved functionality and more technological sophistication:

Our students had previously used a [opt-out] mailing list that included all students [...]. And I used that mailing list to communicate various things [...] [including] "I need a ride to somewhere [...]." There was so much traffic on the list that students who needed a lift didn't see the email from someone else who said that they actually were going and were offering a ride. So students on our student government thought that it would be a good idea to [...] improve the mailing list through social online tools. (Director of IT)

As such, the Zimride platform was perceived as a technological innovation when its adoption resulted from this sensebreaking trigger.

In the second instance, when organizations were searching for a novel solution to their perennial parking problems, the Zimride platform was perceived as an alternative transportation service for internal stakeholders through sensegiving. Zimride staff was pivotal in influencing organizations' initial perception of the ridesharing service:

Zimride contacted our director's office, and because I was involved in transportation they sent the referral to me. I met with [one of the co-founders of Zimride]; he actually came to the site, and we met and had a conversation. It sounded pretty good mainly because it was sort of a minimal investment for us. (Fleet Site Services Manager)



### *Promoting Zimride*

As part of a portfolio of benefits (e.g. subsidized public transportation, campus fitness center) provided to organizational members, the responsibility for framing Zimride's intersubjective meaning fell to site coordinators who were tasked with promoting it. Site coordinators engaged in sensegiving by identifying and communicating the value of Zimride to internal stakeholders in order to get them to use it. The investigators now report on the range of meanings that site coordinators ascribed to the Zimride platform and how site coordinators reinforced this sensegiving within their organization.

*Zimride is safe.* One of the key concerns that internal stakeholders (e.g. parents, employees and administrators) raised around ridesharing was safety:

The biggest risk that we see in terms of [...] worries from parents is the whole safety issue of whether or not their son or daughter will be safe when they get into a car with a stranger. (Transportation Demand Manager)

Most site coordinators argued that Zimride's design uniquely addressed this key concern because access to each ridesharing community on the platform was restricted to the sponsoring organization's members using its single sign-on authentication infrastructure. Every site coordinator that was interviewed perceived immense value in this technology feature:

I personally think that it matters quite a bit "cause it builds a certain immediate level of trust in the system; that you know you're at least going to be interacting with only students, faculty, and staff [...] fifteen thousand people that are already part of the community at the university." (Technical Services Coordinator)

Zimride's reputation management tools and linked social media profiles also provided participating organizational members with insights on ridesharing peers, which further contributed to the framing of the Zimride platform as safe transportation solution:

What Zimride does really well is letting you learn a little bit more about the person that you're gonna carpool with, than other systems where it's just the name and that's it. You know it just brings in like profile pictures from Facebook, you know you're interests from Facebook. It has a rating system, so you know if someone's habitually late you can you know mark them, and say "Hey, this person's never on time." (Assistant Director of Transportation)

The Zimride platform was also cited as providing privacy for participating members because their identifying personal information was not revealed until they agreed to share a ride:

I think the best [feature] it's the ride matching. You can sign up put in your ride where you're going where you're coming from, and it will immediately match you up with people. It'll sort 'em by your preferences: if you're a smoker, if you're willing to drive, or would you rather ride, you know, and it's anonymous until you decide to contact someone. So just message them within the Zimride system, and they don't have to know your personal information. (Transportation Coordinator)

However, sensebreaking of Zimride's ascribed meaning as a safe transportation option was apparent when site coordinators cautioned that the apparent safeguards that had been designed into the Zimride platform sometimes create a "false sense of security" among organizational members. Some organizations even posted website disclaimers about using Zimride because liability remained largely ambiguous in the event of property damage or physical injury during Zimride-brokered ridesharing:

Our board of regents was concerned. They just wanted a sort of disclaimer put up on our Zimride website. It said that, you know, you're using this website to self-identify rides. That people are responsible for any risk that you take on personally by signing for using this service. Any risk or loss, etc, the board of regents is not liable for that sort of risk that you might take.' I guess, you know, whether something happened, an accident, or whatever the case might be while using the service, the university is not liable for that. (Technical Services Coordinator)

*Zimride builds community.* Nevertheless, site coordinators pointed out that Zimride's restricted access instilled a desirable sense of community among participating users. Additionally, organizational members could network off the Zimride platform, which enabled them to build communal ties:

I mean they're kind of, you know, there is a sense of community that builds out of commuting. So that could also be a retention issue. I think it's a great opportunity for alleviating the structure of the daily commute and then an opportunity for employees to engage with each other outside the workplace so there's a sort of bond created. (Travel Manager)

However, there was sensebreaking of this ascribed meaning in site coordinators' acknowledgment that Zimride's community-building potential was contingent on organizational members' sociability:

And then sometimes people say 'Oh, it's fun because we talk the whole time'. Or some people, they would maybe have a not so great experience "Oh, this person was annoying" or "Our personalities just didn't fit well together" or "We were silent the whole way". So [...] [Zimride's role in community building] all depends on like personal experience. (Transportation Demand Management Program Manager)

*Zimride is low-cost.* Zimride charges organizations an initial fee to set up a sponsored ridesharing community plus a monthly subscription fee for its use, which is typically structured as a three-year contract. By and large, the site coordinator that was interviewed considered this expense to be negligible when compared to the cost of providing bus passes and parking subsidies to their organizational members:

[Zimride's] not a very big expense. We pay like our local transit agency over a million dollars for our partnership with them, so to me \$7500 [a year] is a much smaller price tag. (Sustainable Transportation Coordinator)

Additionally, site coordinators regarded the outsourcing of their organization's ridesharing service to Zimride as a good use of their resources:

And so we realized that we want to just sub it out to you know a third-party. It's not a lot of work on our end. (University Sustainability Director)

Site coordinators, however, began to question the cost effectiveness of their Zimride ridesharing community as they gained more experience and familiarity with it. Their sensebreaking centered on whether Zimride was better suited for infrequent long-distance rides vs frequent commuter rides. Whereas most site coordinators had expected Zimride to facilitate commuter ridesharing (benefiting employees and off-campus students), they soon discovered that the vast majority of rides matched on Zimride were for infrequent long-distance rides (e.g. going home over holiday breaks or attend a sports event in a nearby town):

It's more one-time rides than commute rides [posted on Zimride], which to me is an important distinction because for one-time rides you're essentially offering students a benefit service. For commute rides, that's where we're actually getting our money back on the program because if we can encourage carpooling, we can reduce parking demand. I think it's pretty standard for college campuses to be more successful in the one-time ride category. (Sustainable Transportation Coordinator)

*Zimride saves money.* Framing the Zimride platform as having financial benefits for internal stakeholders was also central to site coordinators' sensegiving. They highlighted how organizational members could save money by using the platform to share rides:

I have a means to get to [NEARBY TOWN] or other places with some frequency, and not having to buy a car, not having to spend the extra money besides their share of gas. It seems like a relatively inexpensive endeavor compared to other options out there. (Director of Student Leadership Development)

Site coordinators did, however, acknowledge that Zimride's ability to save internal stakeholders money was contingent on the platform successfully matching riders with drivers among its users. This acknowledgment constituted sensebreaking because Zimride's ability to match rides was constrained by its restricted community access, which often limited the critical mass of participating organizational members. Some site coordinators, therefore, held a more cynical view of the platform's value than they professed:

Now that we have [Zimride], and it's not being utilized, it's one of those things [...] that it's like we have it. It helps, so I can't really complain that we don't provide service. (Director of Student Leadership Development)

*Zimride is sustainable.* Numerous site coordinators highlighted the fit between Zimride's ridesharing service and their organization's commitment to sustainability:

We all know that if you can encourage less vehicles coming to campus or less people driving around that your greenhouse emissions are gonna go down. That is a concern in our office of sustainability. When we told them about Zimride, they were very excited about it. (Manager of Parking Services)

However, the majority of site coordinators only did so after being questioned about this issue, which suggests that Zimride's sustainability value was not the primary focus of their organizational sensegiving. A few site coordinators even expressed doubts about the accuracy of Zimride's carbon footprint calculator, which is based on the assumption that 20 percent of matched rides are completed. However, this sensebreaking was typically dismissed by the majority of site coordinators upon probing:

We trust [Zimride's estimates] enough to report them when we do our greenhouse gas inventory. The metrics that we report will go directly to our carbon footprint inventory, our greenhouse gas inventory reports. (Sustainability Director)

### *Managing Zimride*

Organizations used money earmarked for sustainability projects and environmental compliance to pay for Zimride:

Our director of sustainability is actually sponsoring [Zimride], paying for the system. She got involved early on in the process and latched it on to us, so to speak. (Transportation Demand Manager)

Zimride was partially funded by a grant from a government association that wants to improve air quality and try to reduce traffic congestion. (Transportation Program Manager)

However, this organizational funding obfuscated that the decision to adopt Zimride was largely driven by its appeal as a low-cost alternative transportation service provided to internal stakeholders as a benefit:

My experience is that my department is much more concerned about money than it is about sustainability. [...] The cost of [building] a parking space is like a hundred thousand dollars for a surface lot—like it's so expensive. (Sustainable Transportation Coordinator)

Most organizations did not sufficiently promote nor staff Zimride because it was framed as a low-cost and turnkey IT-enabled CSR program when it was adopted. However, effective promotion of CSR programs is necessary for getting organizational members to participate in them. Furthermore, having a critical mass of prosumers is essential for internal stakeholders to derive functional value from an organization-sponsored sharing platform. Unfortunately, most site coordinators' involvement was limited to having scheduled monthly phone calls with their Zimride sales representative and running an occasional marketing campaign, usually at the

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beginning of each semester (bi-annually). Their meetings with a Zimride sales representative typically entailed a review of their organizational members' platform participation metrics and some strategizing about how the latter might be improved:

I just had a conference call with Zimride a few days ago. In the past ninety days, we saw 199 users sign up, so that's some really good usage out of it especially for the summer. From what [the Zimride rep] telling me, our usage is relatively high compared to other campuses. And Zimride sent me some merchandise, so what I'm doing now is actually advertising. "Post a commute, get a free gift bag from Zimride." A backpack with a water bottle and some magnets, and stuff like that. (Parking Transit Manager)

## Discussion

This paper set out to investigate organization-sponsored sharing platforms – a new class of IT and the sharing economy ideal – by exploring how the Zimride by Enterprise® ridesharing platform is given meaning as a CSR program for internal stakeholders. Bridging noted gaps in the sharing economy and CSR literature about organization-sponsored sharing platforms, the Zimride case study reveals that two component processes of organizational sensemaking – sensegiving and sensebreaking – are underlying micromechanisms used by organizations to enact a sponsored sharing platform as a CSR program. Qualitative findings demonstrate that every meaning given to Zimride remained open to sensebreaking during its implementation. As such, site coordinators were continuously drawn into sensemaking about Zimride's cognitive, linguistic and conative dimensions as a CSR program and had to exert ongoing effort to stabilize its socially (re)constructed meaning within their organization. In fact, site coordinators' sensegiving narrative about Zimride was often undermined by their sensebreaking communications and organizational actions, albeit unintentionally.

Organizations' pragmatic legitimacy when engaging in CSR – their ability to convince internal stakeholders that their decisions and processes are useful (Schultz *et al.*, 2013) – is reduced when there is inconsistency between what organizations say and do. By framing Zimride as a CSR program through sensegiving but then acting in sensebreaking ways, site coordinators undermined its implementation and reduce its impact. As a result, Zimride's organizational value as an internally-focused CSR program was largely symbolic and aspirational – a reminder of what organizational members could and should do. For internal stakeholders to truly derive functional value from the implementation of an organization-sponsored sharing platform, site coordinators must consistently say and do things that reinforce its sensemaking as a CSR program.

When questioned about the inconsistency between their sensemaking communications and actions related to the Zimride ridesharing platform, most site coordinators exhibited a tentative rather than defensive posture. A tentative posture often results from an organization's "inexperience with an issue or because it lacks appropriate tools to devise solutions, causing it to be uncertain regarding the consequences of its actions" (Basu and Palazzo, 2008, p. 129). Site coordinators' tentative posture about Zimride, therefore, suggests that they lack sufficient knowledge and skills to effectively manage this organization-sponsored ridesharing platform. This is an important issue that both sponsoring organizations and service providers must consider when implementing such IT-enabled CSR programs for internal stakeholders. Providing site coordinators with training and support to effectively enact an organization-sponsored sharing platform as a CSR program is pivotal to creating shared value for internal stakeholders. For example, organizations should give site coordinators both time and money to sufficiently promote a sponsored sharing platform to internal stakeholders.

Organizations' normative commitment to CSR, both perceived and actual, would be bolstered if they also invested in scaling their sponsored sharing platform, which would help to institutionalize it as a CSR program (Schultz *et al.*, 2013). Internal stakeholders

can only extract shared value from these IT-enabled CSR programs when a critical mass of them engage as prosumers on a sponsored sharing platform (Bhappu and Schultze, 2018). Organizations’ moral legitimacy should be enhanced by making this strategic investment. Moral legitimacy refers to organizations’ ability to co-create new behavioral norms with stakeholders in order to affect societal change (Schultz *et al.*, 2013). Although the power to promote sustainable consumption resides with organizations (World Economic Forum, 2013), site coordinators need to depend on their organization’s moral legitimacy to compel internal stakeholders to consume collaboratively using an organization-sponsored sharing platform.

Managerial implications

Abstracting from the Zimride case study, the investigators have developed a prescriptive framework for effectively enacting an organization-sponsored sharing platform as a CSR program (see Table I). Their framework builds on Acquier *et al.*’s (2017) conceptualization of the sharing economy as having three foundational cores of access economy, community economy and platform economy. It also incorporates Basu and Palazzo’s (2008) perspective that organizational sensemaking involves the cognitive, linguistic and conative dimensions of CSR programs. Specifically, the investigators assert that during the stage of adoption, an organization should build its community economy by framing the sharing platform as a CSR program for championing sustainable consumption. Organizational sensemaking should, therefore, be focused initially on the cognitive dimensions of the sponsored sharing platform – what organizations think about it – in order to build support for subscribing to this IT-enabled CSR program. Next, an organization should build its access economy by promoting the benefits of using the sponsored sharing platform to engage members. The linguistic dimensions of this CSR program – what organizations say about it – should be most salient during sensemaking at this second stage. Finally, an organization should build its platform economy by managing the sponsored sharing platform in a morally legitimate manner over time in order to create both functional and symbolic value. Accordingly, the conative dimensions of the sponsored sharing platform – what organizations do about it – should be the focus of sensemaking over time as members affirm or contest their organization’s actions related to this IT-enabled CSR program (Table II).

Limitations

The generalizability of this case study should be considered in light of the limitations of the research method. The investigated sample of sponsor organizations represented only a quarter of Zimride customers and consisted primarily of universities. Data collection was also limited to telephone interviews of Zimride site coordinators. Nevertheless, these interviews provided rich qualitative insights on how sensemaking about Zimride – an exemplar organization-sponsored sharing platform – unfolded during its implementation as a CSR program for internal stakeholders. They also revealed ongoing tensions between

Table II.  
Prescriptive  
framework for  
enacting an  
organization-  
sponsored sharing  
platform as a CSR  
program for internal  
stakeholders

Implementation stage	Implementation focus (Acquier <i>et al.</i> , 2017)	CSR program goals	CSR sensemaking focus (Basu and Palazzo, 2008)
Adopting the sharing platform	Community economy	Frame sharing platform as a way to collectively champion sustainable consumption	Cognitive dimensions
Promoting the sharing platform	Access economy	Build critical mass of engaged members by highlighting benefits of sharing platform	Linguistic dimensions
Managing the sharing platform	Platform economy	Maintain sharing platform in a morally legitimate manner to create both functional and symbolic value	Conative dimensions

sensegiving and sensebreaking about Zimride, which reflect the contradictions among the three foundational economic cores – access, community and platform – of this sharing economy ideal. Although the incidence and intensity of sensemaking and tensions may differ across organizations, the process-related findings of this research can generalize beyond the sampled organizations and provide initial empirical evidence about a previously unrecognized class of IT. Similarly, the prescriptive framework can offer some preliminary recommendations to corporations and other organizations seeking to implement a sponsored sharing platform as a CSR program. Future research should extend this research by exploring case studies of other IT-enabled CSR programs and investigating their enactment from the perspective of organizational members.

## Conclusions

Creating a sharing economy within an organization is not for the faint of heart. Sponsoring a sharing platform to facilitate collaborative consumption can deliver triple bottom line benefits for both organizations and their members, but it may not. The key to accruing this potential shared value lies in how site coordinators navigate organizational sensemaking about these IT-enabled CSR programs. In this paper, the investigators provide valuable insights on these sensemaking processes and develop a prescriptive framework for enacting an organization-sponsored sharing platform as a CSR program. By effectively implementing this sharing economy ideal, organizations can demonstrate their social responsibility and create shared value among internal stakeholders.

## Notes

1. This portmanteau comes from the blending of “provider” and “consumer,” highlighting the conflation of these roles in on peer-to-peer sharing platforms.
2. Riders are encouraged to pay drivers a suggested nominal fee to cover the costs associated with giving them a shared ride but this is left entirely up to them to negotiate.

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## Appendix. Site coordinator interview guide

### Introduction

Ask participant to describe their organizational role and tenure, as well as their organization's transportation needs and programs.

### Zimride experience

- (1) How did your organization learn about Zimride?
- (2) What motivated your organization to sign up for Zimride? How did that process unfold? Did you champion it from within?
- (3) What benefits and risks did you anticipate? Did having a private social network matter?
- (4) What did you expect would happen after your organization signed up with Zimride?
- (5) What actually happened? Tell me about your members' ridesharing experience to date.
- (6) How do you measure and monitor your members' ridesharing experience? What performance goals do you have to justify continued offering of the Zimride service?
- (7) Have any members acted in a way that made you uncomfortable or annoyed? Tell me more.
- (8) What would (did) you do if (when) you had an issue amongst members, e.g. accidental harm or uncomfortable interaction?
- (9) Have any members acted in a way that pleasantly surprised you? Tell me more.
- (10) Why do you think that your members use the Zimride service?
- (11) How has their participation affected their feelings about your organization?
- (12) How has their participation affected their use of vehicles and/or public transportation?
- (13) Overall, how would you describe the outcome of offering the Zimride service? How can your experience be improved?
- (14) Is there anything else that you would like to tell me before we end?

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